

What does life-affirming education mean?

"Physics is also about wonder and curiosity; and the more you understand it the more you have a sense of gratitude and reverence—to use Tagore's musical words, you are privileged to find yourself amidst this extraordinary universe and trying to find how things happen around you. If Physics is reconciled with this poetry, science would acquire a new meaning; it would not be reduced into just instrumental technology."

ABOUT US

The New Leam is a monthly magazine on education and culture which started in 2014. It seeks to create new possibilities in the practice of pedagogy, culture and aesthetics through the publication of innovative reading material.

This booklet-written in a dialogic form-has emerged out of the urge to initiate a meaningful conversation with young learners, researchers and educationists.

The New Leam

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Preface

The New Leam is not just a magazine that is published every month. It is a movement—a source of inspiration. It seeks to generate innovative ideas and practices of education, culture and living. It is in this context that we have chosen to bring out a series of booklets for our readers, friends and fellow-travelers. The idea is to communicate deep principles and philosophies in a dialogic mode. For instance, this small booklet has been written in the form of a dialogue or conversation between a student and his/her teacher. It is through questions, interrogations and perpetual reflections that the meaning of life-affirming education has been communicated.

We believe that as a mode of writing it is engaging; it invites the reader; she/he becomes an integral part of the text. Furthermore, we have tried our best to minimize the use of technical idioms or difficult words so that all our readers, irrespective of their specialization, can celebrate this booklet. We have taken special care of its size, format and aesthetics. In the world of ‘soft copies’ we have dared to bring out this ‘hard copy’. But actually it is soft because it is a gift of love.

There is no single author of this booklet. It is a collective endeavor. Yes, we are grateful to **Professor Avijit Pathak (CSSS/SSSS/JNU)** for his insights and encouragement. Finally, we believe that our readers and friends will help us to distribute this booklet all over the country.

July, 2016
New Delhi

Vikash Sharma
Editor
The New Learner

Student: *We have all grown up with a belief that education is primarily a process of acquiring knowledge in academic disciplines like History, Physics, Mathematics and Geography, getting a degree from a formal institution, and earning our livelihood through the application of the 'skills'—academic or technical—that we have mastered. I have heard that you do not agree with this understanding of education. Why is it so?*

Teacher: No, I am not negating your understanding of education. Education is of course about learning academic subjects, acquiring 'skills', and establishing a relationship between knowledge and vocation. In fact, this is the dominant or popular notion of education. However, this is a very narrow and limited understanding of education. I want you to think and reflect, expand your horizon, and experience the deeper meaning of education.

Student: *What is the deeper meaning of education you are talking about? I am curious to know.*

Teacher: What do we do with what you regard as the gains of education— knowledge, information, skills and jobs? I believe you would agree that we all wish to live gracefully, peacefully and meaningfully; none of us wants to be hurt and humiliated; we want a world that is free from violence and exploitation; we strive for love, peace, trust, care. Don't

you think that education is meaningless if it does not prepare us for appreciating, creating and nurturing such a world, if it does not create a sensitive/loving human personality? Yes, go to a school/college/university, learn Mathematics and Economics, become a lawyer or an engineer. I am not objecting to it. But if despite this ‘success’, you remain discontented from within, if jealousy, anger and stress do not escape you, if the world around you remains alienating, if your job does not give you peace and creativity, what do you do? I think you would search for a more fulfilling education leading to an enriching life.

Student: *What you are saying sounds good. But don't you think it is too idealistic? Is it really possible for us to be so sensitive to the world when there is intense competition, there is excessive pressure for achievement, success and career?*

Teacher: I take your question pretty seriously. Yes, at one level what I am saying is idealistic; you might call it ‘utopian’ because the world around you is ruthlessly violent, individualistic and competitive. For instance, the market-oriented capitalist culture generates fear—if you do not defeat others, possess resources, and assert your superiority in terms of ‘merit’, ‘intelligence’ and ‘personality’ you would be a loser. It makes you think that life is essentially about possession and accumulation, not about reducing our needs, sharing resources with all, and finding joy in reciprocity and togetherness. So when your parents send you to school they want you to be a ‘topper’. And how can you be a topper without defeating others? Your educational institution wants you to be ‘successful’ in terms of career,

power and pay package. As a result, you begin to evolve a very utilitarian relationship with education. No matter whether you are studying Physics or Literature, Medicine or Law, you see it as a tool for the upliftment of your socio-economic status. And you legitimate it in the name of ‘meritocracy’. In fact, you cherish your ‘success’ because others have failed! It simply doesn’t come to your mind that education can have some other meanings also—self-reflection, enrichment of the inner world, aesthetic sensibilities and spirit of love and communion. And that is the way things are happening around you. All our examinations, ranking mechanisms, life-priorities are perpetually telling you this story: be hard, aggressive; be a ‘winner’. That is why, you are right in saying that I am ‘idealistic’, or I am imagining some sort of ‘tenderness’ that does not exist. But I wish to ask you a counter question: What has your ‘pragmatism’ done to you and to the world? Think of it carefully. It has caused fear in your

What has your ‘pragmatism’ done to you and to the world? Think of it carefully. It has caused fear in your mind; it has made you stressed, anxiety-ridden and suspicious of others. It has made it difficult for you to learn with joy, with beauty, without any utilitarian urge. It has given you information, but not sensitivity. It has given you intelligence, but not awakening. It has given you money, but not peace.

mind; it has made you stressed, anxiety-ridden and suspicious of others. It has made it difficult for you to learn with joy, with beauty, without any utilitarian urge. It has given you information, but not sensitivity. It has given you intelligence, but not awakening. It has given you money, but not peace. Likewise, the larger world is becoming more and more violent. Our scientists are manufacturing destructive weapons; our technologists are promoting a profit-driven techno-capitalist empire that breeds consumerism and media-induced simulation; our economists are devising a model of 'development' that is causing ecological disaster. So what is the use of your pragmatism if it makes us unhappy? Possibly the answer lies in what you tend to negate as 'idealistic' or 'utopian'.

Student: *Well, I agree with you partly. It is true that the prevalent practice of education has become utilitarian and career-centric. But then, is it possible to do anything about it when the larger social system—its economy, polity and culture—wants you to be aggressive, competitive and egoistic? Can you change the pattern of education without altering the system?*

Teacher: I was expecting a question of this kind. It is a genuine question. We need to reflect on it with clarity and depth. What is a 'structure' or a 'system'? It is a set of connections among different components which affect one another. And that is why, we say that economy, polity, culture and education—all are deeply connected; and it is not possible to isolate one from the other. Let us understand it. If your economic pattern rests on the

capitalistic ethos, it is bound to promote a culture that encourages conspicuous consumption; and a culture that is based on the stimulation of human desire for consumption of ever-expanding market-induced needs is bound to encourage a practice of education that makes one possessive, greedy and materialistic; and this sort of education will be in tune with a political practice that is recklessly instrumental and devoid of ethical principles; and a politics of this kind cannot interrogate the fundamentals of the capitalist economy. So, as you see, things are connected. Now how do you change the system? You have to begin from somewhere. It is not that one day all of a sudden the entire system will change through a magical formula called REVOLUTION. Nor is it that one component—say, economy—is more important than others, and hence you have to change it first, and only then can you think of changing other components. This is a very 'deterministic' position—economy determines culture! It can make you fatalistic. You may think that capitalism as a dominant economic practice is so overwhelmingly powerful that it cannot be changed so easily, and hence there is no point in taking creative/life-transforming initiatives in any other front of society. Instead, I believe that it is important to start the process, work on any front, and it will have its impact on other fronts. So if through an innovative practice of education you cultivate your creative faculties—empathy, ethic of care, relatedness and sensitivity to nature, inner contentment, aesthetic wonder, you would begin to say 'no' to a culture of conspicuous

consumption, you would not be carried away by a political leader who uses rhetoric, but essentially promotes the interests of the corporate world. In other words, a change will begin somewhere.

Student: *I see your point. But I still feel that without changing the economic system you cannot do much in the front of education.*

Teacher: I am afraid you are taking a deterministic position. As I have said, all these components are interconnected. Don't take 'either/or' position. Don't say: 'first, economy, then education.' Everything must go together. And hence when you work on education you are also cultivating a mind needed for seeing beyond the capitalistic economy. I wish to give you an example. Why should anyone try to alter capitalism if people continue to believe that competitiveness/possessiveness is natural, man is essentially egoistic and selfish, and the institution of differential rewards is the only way to make people work? If you at all strive for an ecologically sensitive, egalitarian, just world, you need to have an experience of the beauty of sharing, aesthetic living, simplicity and awareness of the distinction between inner beauty and outer glamour. In other words, people need to be educated differently. It is sad that today the political class or even 'revolutionaries' do not realize the importance of life-affirming education for creating a better society. So don't be deterministic; instead, think of connectedness.

Student: *How do you practice a different form of education when institutions function on an altogether different logic?*

Teacher: True. It is not easy. See our schools. Its enclosure, its boundary, its closed classrooms, its obsession with artificial discipline and order, a teacher's monologue, the fear among students, the preoccupation with exam results, bad textbooks, rote learning—it goes on like this. Or see our overcrowded universities. An alliance of demotivated teachers and students, lumpenization of campus politics, the culture of guide books—things are terribly bad. I am aware of this harsh reality. I know that the implementation of a different form of education requires changes in many fronts. We need to rethink schools as open spaces (not prisons) for the cultivation of integral learning that unites body and soul, mental and manual, book and life. We need teachers—not just trained subject-experts; we need teachers filled with hope, patience and creative

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imagination. We need a mode of evaluation that, far from demoralizing the student, makes it possible for him to know his uniqueness, his hidden talent and potential. We need aesthetically enriched books, not dry textbooks; we need innumerable resources or learning material from nature, from the local milieu. In other words, we need to work on many things simultaneously—right from the spatial design of the school, to pedagogy, curriculum and the quality of teachers. It is a difficult job. But you cannot wait till all the conditions are fulfilled. You have to start from your present situation only. A small step leads to a great momentum. If you have the conviction, you can make a difference even under extremely hostile circumstances. That is the only miracle. There is no other miracle.

Student: *Yet, I am not fully satisfied, I have a question. Suppose I get an opportunity to educate myself in a way you are talking about. But I see that the system is still very powerful. Should not it demoralize me? Should not it make me a loser, somewhat 'unfit' in the practical world?*

Teacher: I can understand your anxiety. And it is natural to have this anxiety. Let us understand it. Yes, no change is complete; no change is absolute; it is a constant process. So never do you find yourself in an 'ideal' situation when everything is perfect. Suppose through a practice of life-affirming education you have felt the virtues of love, simplicity, togetherness, ecological sensitivity and non-possessive personality. True, if the larger society is not in tune with your spirit you will be a 'loser' in some sense of

the term. For instance, you would not be able to adjust to a career that involves manipulation and exploitation of people and natural resources; and most of the time these jobs—say, the job of an engineer who has joined a real estate empire, or the job of a techno-manager who has joined the corporate world for selling wine, beauty products and trendy gadgets, or the job of lawyer who takes up the cases of only celebrities and transforms their vices into virtues—are seen to be the markers of 'success'. Naturally, you would earn less; you would not be able to create 'political network'; you would not have 'fame' and 'power'. But this very loss is the beginning of your gain. You will gain peace, inner contentment, creative satisfaction, the rigor of honesty. Moreover, nothing meaningful is possible if your mind is always filled with fear—fear of unemployment, fear of social status. If you dare to undertake a journey you will find your way.

Student: *However, it requires tremendous courage—the courage to take 'risks'. Aren't you expecting too much from us?*

Teacher: You see, it is important to choose one's priorities in life. What do you want—perpetually falling into the trap of 'success' and 'failure', and its implicit sado-masochism, or the joy in the ecstasy of creative work, human relationships, inner peace; excessive money with constant pressure, sleeplessness and anxiety, or what is just essential for leading a life that has its music, relaxed moments, and innocence; obsession with 'fame' and 'power', and thereby perpetually compromising with the basic principles of life,

or finding great joy and meaning in your own work, in offering, in reciprocity, in the rhythm of everydayness? You have to choose your priorities. And once you are convinced of your priorities, you do not speak of 'risks'; you feel it is your pilgrimage. And the kind of education I am talking about transforms you into a pilgrim.

Student: *As I hear you, I feel it is truly convincing. It has begun to touch my heart. Yet, my 'rationality' speaks another language. Aren't you deviating from the academic/technical component of formal education, and shifting towards some sort of moral/poetic/spiritual education?*

Teacher: I appreciate your enquiring spirit. You should not agree with me unless you are fully convinced. I do not wish to create a duality of 'intellectual' vs. 'ethical', 'academic' vs. 'experiential', 'scientific' vs. 'poetic'. An integrated existence unites everything. Take, for instance, Physics as a body of academic knowledge. It is a remarkably illuminating discipline; it helps you to make sense of the natural phenomenon. But is it only about laws, discoveries and complicated mathematical principles? Physics is also about wonder and curiosity; and the more you understand it the more you have a sense of gratitude and reverence—to use Tagore's musical words, you are privileged to find yourself amidst this extraordinary universe and trying to find how things happen around you. If Physics is reconciled with this poetry, science would acquire a new meaning; it would not be reduced into just instrumental technology. Or think of History—yet another important body of

academic knowledge. Why do you study it? Is it only for knowing your past—a bundle of hard facts, archival documents? Do you study History only to be burdened with a heavy load of information? If History is like this, then it is oppressive; it does not liberate us. History is also about great wonder—how our ancestors lived, how civilization evolved, how we found ourselves in contemporary times. It establishes connectedness. It restrains narcissistic egos. To know about Buddha is to experience humility; to analyze the history of wars is to realize how power (power of a king, power of an empire, power of a nation-state), greed and hyper-masculinity have been causing violence; and then history inspires us to engage with Jesus or Buddha, Rumi or Kabir, Tolstoy or Gandhi, and contemplate on their insights. So you see things are united.

Student: *But then, academicians can counter your arguments by saying that their primary objective is to become 'scholars', or detached-value-neutral 'specialists'.*

Teacher: Yes, they can. While I admire their academic excellence and specialization, I don't think that 'scholarship' is above life, its rhythm, its existential quest, its integrative principles. One of the major problems of our times is that we have specialists without souls, experts without conscience. Don't you think this is the reason why a phenomenon like holocaust could take place? Yes, they all were 'specialists' from universities. How meticulously, scientifically they planned the engineering of death! If your

specialization dissociates you from love, ethics and spirituality, it can prove to be disastrous. Education cannot be reduced into a mere exercise in knowing the minute details of a specialized body of knowledge; education is about wisdom, integration and connectedness.

Student: *That's fine. But these finer values and sensibilities can be learned outside formal educational institutions. As far as schools/ colleges/ universities are concerned, don't you think that their primary task is to teach academic disciplines?*

Teacher: It is true that learning takes place everywhere; and quite often meaningful learning takes place outside formal institutions—not through textbooks, curriculum, examinations, degrees and diplomas, but through the trajectory of life: its intense moments of love and pain, festivity and death, music and literature, work and everyday experiences. But that does not mean that formal educational institutions have no role to play in generating a positive orientation to life. You see that these days a significant part of a person's life is spent in these institutions. Is it only for learning how to solve a mathematical riddle, or how to make an experiment in the Chemistry lab? Study all these subjects which have their immense relevance. But these subjects, as I have already said, can be learned differently. Only then is it possible to transcend all these oppressive dualities—theory and practice, reason and feeling, intellect and experience, objectivity and reflexivity, formal and informal, book and life.

Student: *It is really difficult to deny the relevance of what you are*

saying. I am curious to know the sources of your inspiration. Are you political? It seems you are spiritual.

Teacher: What do you mean by 'political'? I am not a member of a political party. I do not contest an election; I do not adhere to a fixed political ideology. But does it mean that I have ceased to be political? I am concerned about how power has to be decentralized and creatively used, how we should rethink technology and development, evolve a meaningful policy of distributive justice. This means I am thinking politically—possibly more meaningfully than what some professional politicians do. Or even when I look at education, I have a sense of history and politics. For instance, I am aware of the fact that in a class-divided society schools often perpetuate the dominant class ideology through their curriculum and other

Have you seen a mountain peak at the time of sunrise and sunset? Don't be in a hurry to grab it in your camera. Remain silent. Feel it—deeply, meaningfully and intensely. You realize extraordinary beauty and calmness; you realize a great merger; the walls of academic disciplines have broken; physics, mathematics, aesthetics and spirituality have come together. That is life; it integrates. Why should our education be deprived of this music?

rituals; I know how corporate capitalism is altering the character of universities—the way the market is allowed to define the parameters of ‘useful’ knowledge. So when I am pleading for a life-affirming meaningful education, I know the context in which I am talking about—the obstacles that need to be overcome. Furthermore, what do you mean by ‘spiritual’? Does it mean renunciation of the world? Does it mean just uttering empty slogans like love, peace and harmony? No, I am not ‘spiritual’ in that sense. But I am spiritual in a different sense. I am spiritual because I believe that life has a deeper meaning; it is not just about egoistic and physical or intellectual pleasures; it is about connectedness, the realization of the eternal energy that manifests itself in every particle, be it a flower blooming, a tree dancing, a child playing, a dancer dancing. It is this connectedness that helps us to overcome *ignorance*—the obsession with one’s ego—my body, my land, my wife, my child, my party, my ideology. It generates love and compassion. It creates the will to unite love and action, and politics and ethics. And hence as far as the sources of inspiration are concerned there are many. When you look at the range of innovations and experimentations in the field of education that have been made all over the world you become humble. You notice that this dichotomy of ‘political’ vs. ‘spiritual’ does not exist. No wonder, from Tagore to Gandhi, from Sri Aurobindo to Jiddu Krishnamurti, from Ivan Illich to Paulo Freire—my sources of inspiration are indeed diverse and many. I keep learning, unlearning and evolving. But I must say that my real source

of inspiration is nature itself. I wish to give you an example. Have you seen a mountain peak at the time of sunrise and sunset? Don’t be in a hurry to grab it in your camera. Remain silent. Feel it—deeply, meaningfully and intensely. You realize extraordinary beauty and calmness; you realize a great merger; the walls of academic disciplines have broken; physics, mathematics, aesthetics and spirituality have come together. That is life; it integrates. Why should our education be deprived of this music?

Student: *There is another question which I must ask you. Your ideas have great beauty. But don’t you think that not everyone can afford to experiment with these ideas? See our country. You know about schools without basic infrastructure; you know about dropout, caste / gender discrimination, bad teachers, corporal punishment; you know about huge gap in education. At this juncture, people need some basic knowledge, some basic skills, some basic infrastructure—chairs, benches and blackboards, some regular teachers. What you are saying is too high. Its time has not come. Maybe only some ‘experimental’ elite schools can take your ideas.*

Teacher: It is a brilliant question. I too keep thinking about it. However, I have a different way of looking at it. There are two myths that I want you to debunk. The first myth is that great ideas require excessive money for their implementation. The second myth is that poor people have no cultural sensibilities or higher aspirations. These two myths—often perpetuated by people like us: middle class reformers, activists and revolutionaries—have led to a very faulty way of looking at education. We tend to think: just

give them mid-day meal; supply them with some badly printed/written books, teach them three Rs, and anyone can do it! You need not think much about it. Once you overcome these myths you realize that for good work what you need is not so much money, but the abundance of positive imagination, creative will, and faith in people (everyone, no matter how deprived or poor one is, has the potential), and if a teacher is a true catalyst this potential can be unfolded. I will give you concrete examples to make my point clear. Imagine a rural school with children coming from the families of small peasants and farmers. You are teaching science. These children have seen their parents working in, say, paddy fields, sowing seeds in the field, harvesting it, and waiting for the monsoon showers. In other words, the entire domain of work is a beautiful lab for introducing science—how and why crops grow, the formation of clouds and rains, and so many other things. This doesn't require money, smart boards, heavily equipped labs; this just requires a good teacher gifted with the art of creative pedagogy. And this enables the child to equate knowledge with local surroundings. Or think of literature. Do you think that it is only the privilege of children confined to the four walls of 'international' schools in our metros to read and understand poetry? Don't forget that most of the time poetry, for them, is just a collection of rhythmic words, and Wordsworth and Milton are just names to be remembered for television quiz contests. The burden of class privilege often makes it difficult for them to feel poetry. But here is a situation of a different kind. They

experience the cycle of nature; they grow up with cows and goats; they play in open spaces; they have seen how their parents, after a day's hard work, sing *bhajans* and *kirtans* in a local Hanuman temple. A good teacher can begin with this experiential domain, and help the child to cultivate her language skills—the ability to translate experiences (the monsoon showers, the paddy fields and the expanded horizon, the cultivation of crops, the songs that their mothers and grandmothers sing at the time of wedding or death or the birth of a child in the family) into words. That is poetry. That is literature. That is language. You see, the problem is that we do not work on pedagogy; we do not have faith in human

Possibly life will go on like this; it is a kind of recurrent *Mahabharata*—the continual struggle of light and darkness. One doesn't know whether there is an end to this war. But then, as I have said, your priorities have to be clear—whether in this struggle you strive for light, or perpetuate darkness. And moreover, don't strive for instant/quick remedies; the struggle goes on with its ups and downs. And even if you do not reach the destination, the journey itself has its meaning. Education is the preparedness for undertaking this difficult, yet illuminating journey.

potential; we come with prejudiced notions that these children are useless, and hence somehow fill their ‘empty’ minds with alphabets and counting, and don’t try anything great because they don’t have the money. This is wrong—ethically as well as pedagogically. My feeling is that your faith, your will, your patience and your creative pedagogy have immense capacity to conquer the obstacles of ‘poor infrastructure’.

Student: *My last question: How can you afford so much optimism?*

Teacher: I knew that you would ask me this question. Let me respond to it. If by ‘optimism’ you mean just daydreaming, or ignorance of obstacles and difficulties, or refusal to acknowledge the recurrence of betrayals—the history of human greed, cunningness and violence, then I am not an ‘optimist’. And if by ‘pessimism’ you mean that humans are inherently selfish, greedy and exploitative, or inequality is in our blood, or the rich are rich because of their ‘merit’ and the poor are poor because of their ‘stupidity’, and hence nothing can be done about it, then I am not a ‘pessimist’. I want you to see beyond these categories. See life in its totality. Yes, there are obstacles; there are negativities; there are structural constraints; yet, there are efforts, there are aspirations, there are experimentations. That is why, history gives you Hitler as well as Gandhi; nature gives you draught as well as monsoon; psychoanalysis tells you about Oedipus; yet, Gautama Buddha was born. Possibly life will go on like this; it is a kind of recurrent *Mahabharata*—the continual struggle of

light and darkness. One doesn’t know whether there is an end to this war. But then, as I have said, your priorities have to be clear—whether in this struggle you strive for light, or perpetuate darkness. And moreover, don’t strive for instant/quick remedies; the struggle goes on with its ups and downs. And even if you do not reach the destination, the journey itself has its meaning. Education is the preparedness for undertaking this difficult, yet illuminating journey.